001

Before the advent of the new goddess Mayoi Hachikuji, it was Nadeko Sengoku who resided at North Shirahebi Shrine—that is to say, it was me.

Me. Me!

But it's not something I can puff up my chest with pride about; I didn't behave like much of a goddess.

Well, I recently became a third year in middle school (technically, that is; I'm not attending), I got taller, and my bust size suddenly got bigger, but I still can't puff up my chest with pride about it, nor do I remember it fondly.

Even now, when I think about what happened back then, I end up hunched over in shame.

As if a snake is raising its head at me.

I start swaying.

Yet despite that, I'm not so irresponsible as to not give this shrine or my successor any thought whatsoever. This new goddess, who had taken over where I left off—that is to say, who had taken over in the wake of the utter chaos I had caused—essentially, who had been forced to take on all my bad debt—had been on my mind, and I felt a vague sense of guilt.

Seems like it all comes back to snails.

I think there's about as much difference between snakes and snails as there is between flamenco and hula dancing, but apparently they've been pressed into a three-way deadlock theory:

The frog fears the snake, the snake fears the slug, and the slug fears the frog—in other words, snails, which are closely related to slugs, are capable of swallowing up the threat of snakes.

You might be about to say, "Oh, I see," and think you've learned something, but if you ask me, as someone who had all hundred thousand hairs on her head turn into snakes last year, I honestly don't think this three-way deadlock theory holds water.

After all, snakes eat slugs—and snails too.

Snakes munch, crunch, and swallow them up.

There's even a mountain snake that specializes in eating snails called "Iwasaki's snail-eater"—to a snake, a frog, a slug, and a snail would look like a three-course meal.

Although that's not exactly the reason why, I was a bit worried, a bit anxious about whether Mayoi Hachikuji-chan could handle taking over the responsibility that I had abandoned.

I was so preoccupied with my own issues, I kept calmly letting chances slip by, postponing and postponing, but now that the dust has settled on my failed first love, it seems the time has finally come.

I've moved on from Koyomi-san.

Now it's time to move on from godhood.

If I don't, I won't be able to move on from middle school.

002

"—And that's how Ms. Mayoi brilliantly rescued the transistor-slender(1) fifth grader. Quite a difference compared to you, eh, Nadeko?"(2)

The little doll-girl Yotsugi Ononoki-chan told me about it while maintaining the pose from the Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci, sitting in a chair in the center of my room on the second floor of the Sengoku home. Speaking of which, this little doll-girl cadaver, Yotsugi Ononoki-chan, has a public reputation as an expressionless, monotonal character, but right now she was helping me by serving as a model for my sketches, so there was a thin smile adorning her face.

She was simply stiffening her flesh (rigor mortis?) into that particular shape, though, so she certainly wasn't really smiling, but I felt like I was bearing sole witness to a rare and precious thing… I wonder why she would do so much to help me of all people while saying nasty stuff like, "Quite a difference compared to you"…

I couldn't help but think it was odd.

"I mean, Kujaku Beniguchi and Mr. Demon probably have different opinions, but I think *you* acted much more like a god. She went so far just to save a single human, a human from a neighboring town at that; she overdid it a little. Could even say she abused her power, disregarded her jurisdiction. There's a line of reasoning that says that a god who reigns while thinking about no one but herself, like you, is much more god-like—all a god needs to do is exist."

"Hmm… I see."

"But that also means that it's okay for different kinds of gods to exist. It's fine for there to be 'quite a difference' between you two. In any case, your successor has accomplished her duty, after a fashion. Could even say that her training period is now over."

“Training period.”

“Write 'training period’ in kanji, at least.”

How did she know I said that in hiragana?(3)

I’m drawing Ononoki-chan right now, not kanji.

I forgot to mention, I quit being a god, and I’m currently a hikikomori who draws manga.

Ononoki-chan comes over to see me three times a week, and helps me improve my drawing skills—I know why, of course.

She’s not supporting me and my dreams for the future purely out of kindness and affection; she’s monitoring me to make sure I, as something of a former goddess, don’t do anything foolish.

“I think I told you before, and Mr. Demon seems to have it halfway wrong too, but basically, the only person I’m monitoring is Tsukihi Araragi. I just observe you and Mr. Demon while I’m at it. Could even say it’s part of my camouflage. Luckily, Tsukihi Araragi wasn’t involved this time, so I was able to really let myself shine.”

“Hmm… Tsukihi-chan.”

“I’d have been even luckier if Tsukihi Araragi had died, though… I wonder what would make that girl die…”

“Um… I’ll listen to as much grumbling about your roommate as you’d like, but Ononoki-chan, please don’t forget that Tsukihi-chan is kind of a close friend of mine, okay?”

“You have me as a close friend now, so you don’t need her, do you?”

“I don’t suppose I’ll ever make friends with people who aren’t dangerous…”

But, anyway, is that so.

Her training period is over.

Is it alright for me to breathe a sigh of relief?

I was playing at being a god at North Shirahebi Shrine for quite a long time, but that whole era is now completely in the past—well, it’s not as though I’ve thought about anything so outrageous as taking another pass at it.

No matter what Ononoki-chan says, I didn’t do a single thing that could be considered god-like.

Far from bringing peace to this town, I brought about chaos; I couldn't save a single person. Not even myself.

"But, Nadeko. I think you'll have to do something 'god-like' in the near future."

"Oh? What do you mean?"

"You're aiming to become a manga artist, so I'll put it to you like this: it's a change of staff. Partly because of that stuff Mr. Kaiki did, the ritual of inheritance was delayed and left unsettled, but I think you'll have to do it properly soon. And besides, thinking of your future, it's probably high time you met Gaen-san too."

"Change of staff"… That phrase fits it perfectly.

I see; the time has finally come for me to meet Gaen-san—she's Kaiki-san's senior, and the specialists' boss.

I've heard so much about her.

The argument could be made that she was the one who turned me into a god in the first place… But thinking about my future, it's true; she's someone I can't avoid meeting.

I'll steel my stomach.

"But Ononoki-chan, can I ask you something? What kind of person is Gaen-san?"

"There are all sorts of legends about her, right? Well, she has a gentle-mannered and friendly demeanor, so I don't think there's any reason to be afraid. It'll be up to her to decide what the ritual of divine inheritance will be, but when all is said and done, she's kind to children; she won't do anything to scare you. That's what's scary about her, though."

Well, even if I call her scary.

She's not as scary as my Onee-chan—Ononoki-chan added, erasing the forced smile from her face.

Footnotes:
(1) The term "transistor slender" is a reference to "transistor glamour", which means a woman is short but well-proportioned. I honestly don't know what transistors have to do with it, but I believe Ononoki's invention means "short and slim", and she came up with the term to give Koyomi a bit of guff for his lolicon tendencies.
(2) In the original, Ononoki uses the nickname she came up with for Nadeko in Nademonogatari, "Nadekou", using the character 公 (kou) instead of 子

(ko). It's kind of a pun, but not really. If you're curious, wait for Nademonogatari to be translated.
(3) In Japanese words can be written using kanji (Chinese characters), but also phonetically using kana, which is common when kanji are too difficult or when kids haven't learned them yet. Nadeko repeats the word "training period" in kana after Ononoki says it in kanji.

003

"Name's Yozuru Kagenui. Good to meet ya."

North Shirahebi Shrine, dead of night.

Arrogantly perched atop the shrine's offertory box was a beautiful young lady wearing stylish pants—*she's much younger than I'd heard*, I thought, before realizing it was a totally different person.

It wasn't Gaen-san.

It wasn't the one with the friendly demeanor.

Wherever might Izuko-san be?(1)

Kagenui-san? Yozuru Kagenui-san?

Yozuru Kagenui-san, as I recall, is the onmyouji who uses Ononoki-chan as a shikigami… right? At a glance, she looks like a really scary person…

I didn't intend to blame her, but when I looked back at Ononoki-chan—who had accompanied me as I climbed the mountain to get here—to ask why she hadn't told me about this, she seemed to be just as surprised about the sudden appearance of her "master" as I was.

I had observed her in detail for enough sketches that I could read her (lack of) facial expressions.

"Onee-chan—why are you here?"

"Gaen-senpai had some urgent business come up, so I'm somethin' like a pinch hitter here. People can't escape their worldly duties. This kinda thing's happened before, right?"

Ononoki-chan.

Answering the question from her shikigami, Kagenui-san jumped down from the offertory box, nimbly and soundlessly.

No, I shouldn't say she jumped down.

She jumped from the offertory box onto the stone lantern.

It was shocking to see her jump a distance of several meters without an approach run, and when she landed atop the stone lantern—something it hardly seemed possible to balance on—without so much as a wobble, I couldn't help but be astonished.

That's not a landing zone, that's a vertex.

This must be the curse I've heard rumors about, where she's unable to walk on land; it certainly doesn't seem like she's at all impeded by it.

"And you there are Nadeko Sengoku, I imagine? C'mere."

"……"

She told me to c'mere. Like it was some kind of catchphrase.

She's really glaring at me. Or maybe she just has a menacing face? Did I do something to this lady…? I know I can do some pretty insensitive things without realizing and end up rubbing people the wrong way, but I doubt I'd have offended someone I'd never met before…

As a hikikomori, I spend all my time in my room wearing a tracksuit, but since I was meeting with someone today—for a ritual, no less—I thought I was dressed properly…

I'm not wearing a school swimsuit.

Just so you know.

"Seems you've been lookin' after Yotsugi. Wanted to meet and greet ya properly at some point. Idiot. Lately I've had my hands completely full tryin' to catch Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicide-Master, so I haven't had the time to."

"O-oh…"

She didn't slip an "idiot" in there, did she?

"Hey, now. Get over here."

Kagenui-san beckoned to me, like a princess.

"Don't be so scared. You'll hurt my feelings."

"……"

Ah, that's right.

It would be impolite to get frightened just from her appearance and attitude. My irrational behavior might be rubbing her the wrong way. Above all, I don't like her thinking I'm scared—I don't know how it comes across, but I'm no longer the Nadeko Sengoku I was before.

I don't hide my eyes behind bangs anymore, nor do I use my name "Nadeko" as a first-person pronoun.

I gathered my courage and stepped forward toward Kagenui-san.

She hit me.

She whacked me in the head, utilizing the height difference from atop the stone lantern. Huh?

I was more puzzled than hurt… This lady just hit me without any pretext?

She hit a girl in the face (or rather, close to it; the top of my head?).

She punched me as if it were some kind of greeting. Is her way of greeting people?

You've got to be kidding.

Unable to accept the fact that I'd been whacked at the very moment I met someone, I looked at Ononoki-chan for a second time.

"Don't look to me for help. You're my friend, but Onee-chan is my master. I can't back you up. You've got to get through this on your own."

She was expressionless as she responded.

Are you serious?

As the first person to be saved at this shrine, Benikujaku-chan, might say, are you serious, please?(2)

To think that even the trustworthy Ononoki-chan would turn against me, it's like the climax of a shounen manga!

I won't lie, this is thrilling!

Well, it does seem like Ononoki-chan hadn't expected this to happen either, though…

I turned back immediately, as if performing a dance step, and faced Kagenui-san once again.

She was crouching on the stone lantern, readying her fist for another go—but she held it down with her other hand.

"Sorry, sorry, I accidentally hit ya. Was 'cause I could reach ya."

"Because you could reach me? You hit me because you could reach me?"

"Yep. I got kinda pissed off."

…Is “getting kinda pissed off” a plausible reason to hit someone? For an edgy adolescent, maybe… But you are an adult, aren’t you?

“Oh, right. It’s 'cause Oshino-kun and Kaiki-kun are so soft on kids. Thought I ought to hit 'em when I meet 'em. I’m sure Nadeko Sengoku would enjoy getting hit by someone, y'know?”

I don’t enjoy being hit.

Please don’t twist that into a justification for hitting me. With that “Oh, right”.

Give me a break, please; I’m not going to get along with this lady in any way.

Oshino-san, maybe, but I did not get the impression that Kaiki-san was very soft on children (I heard he got kids caught up in his con game and made them his victims—in a way, I was an indirect victim of his); however, anyone would seem kind, compared to this lady.

I began to be overtaken by the feeling that I shouldn’t have come here—but in order to give God-Nadeko proper closure, I had to perform this transfer, even if it’s just a formality.

Speaking of which, where is the girl (goddess?) in question?

“If you’re askin’ about Hachikuji-chan, I’ve already had her start. She’s bathin’ in a waterfall behind the shrine.”

Waterfall bathing?

Did this shrine have a waterfall?

“Seems like she made it as a joke, but I thought we should use it more productively. As the one who’s takin’ over, she’s got to cleanse herself, y'know? As the next goddess, she’s gotta be receptive and passive here, so that’s a good task for her. Now, as for the combative, active Sengoku-chan…”

What shall we do…

Atop the lantern, Kagenui-san crossed her arms. Please don’t be thinking it up right now. I would very much prefer if the content of the serious ritual I’m performing isn’t just thought up on the spot…

Combative, huh.

The opposite of receptive isn’t combative.

So this is a transfer of divinity?

Before, when I wore a school swimsuit to perform a ritual here (Kanbaru-

san misunderstood the word “purity”), I can’t say it was much of a success… Circumstances are different, but maybe this will end up being revenge for back then.

“North Shirahebi Shrine… Shirahebi means 'white snake’. And 'Hachikuji’ sounds like 'eight nine ten’… Hmm. Alright, let’s do it.”

Kagenui-san jumped up once again. I thought she might be going back to the offertory box, but this time she didn’t jump very far—it was a small jump, hardly more than a step.

That is to say, Kagenui-san… landed on top of my head.

It was such a flawless, ten-out-of-ten landing that I couldn’t help but think she had whacked me there in order to check how strong it was.

But, she’s light? It’s like she’s not even there?

The sensation was even lighter than wearing a hat.

Is this something from classical Chinese martial arts?

“You’ve got from now 'til mornin’ to gather eighty-nine white snakes from this mountain and hand 'em over to the new goddess. That’ll be the proof of your abdication in favor of the little lost girl.”

Footnotes:
(1) “Izuko” is Gaen’s first name, but it’s also a way of saying “where”.
(2) This is my effort at translating her bizarre vocal quirk of saying “masu” after “desu” and vice versa.

004

From what I’ve heard, North Shirahebi Shrine was previously located in Shirohebi Park—despite the long-running controversy about whether the name was read as “Rouhaku Park” or “Namishiro Park”, neither turned out to be correct; “Shirohebi” is the park’s official name.(1)

Although the water radical on the left(2) makes it seem like the name is referring to a sea snake, well, there *are* quite a few aquatic snakes around here, and if I were told it came from ancient folklore then that would make a lot of sense. After all, folklore is kind of like a game of telephone.

However, when I heard about it, I thought that, for my part, I preferred the name “Namishiro Park”.

That’s because there’s a type of snake called *namihebi*—sea snakes; the famous Japanese rat snake is one of them.

And albino rat snakes are commonly referred to as “white snakes”, it

seems—North Shirahebi Shrine… North White Snake Shrine.

But as you might expect of snakes that were worshiped religiously, finding them is no easy task—let alone finding ninety of them.

"I'm sorry that this turned out differently from what I told you. And that I can't help you. The ritual can't be completed if you don't do it yourself, apparently."

Ononoki-chan called out to me, not from atop my head, but from atop a tree. I had left the shrine grounds, and had gone into a grove to look for snakes.

From that angle, her panties were in full view.

I don't derive any pleasure from looking at little girls' panties, but after hearing her apologize, I couldn't complain—I had nothing to complain about in the first place.

It was a bit humiliating to get punched and stepped on, but I'll soon be going out into the world and trying to become an artist, so those are things I'll just have to accept.

There are people who don't like me.

Indeed.

"Onee-chan said she was pissed, but she didn't say she disliked you. Actually, I think she likes kids who have guts."

"I don't have any guts… Aha!"

As I was talking to Ononoki-chan, I noticed *something* darting in the corner of my eye and swiftly reached out my hand—although I succeeded in grabbing it by the scuff of its neck, it was, unfortunately, not a white snake.

Just an ordinary snake.

It wasn't even a Japanese rat snake.

It was a *shiromadara*—an Oriental odd-tooth.

Despite the name,(3) it couldn't be called a white snake.

The Oriental odd-tooth was baring its fangs, twisting its tail and body around in an attempt to escape from my grip—hey, it's okay; I'm not going to chop you up with a chisel.

I'm going to let you go.

Since it would be dangerous to drop it nearby, I hurled it a fair distance

away. Forgive me for being rough; I didn't want to get bitten.

"…You didn't just casually grab a snake, did you? Carelessly, with your hand?"

"Huh? Yeah. Was because I could reach it."

"That's the same exact thing Onee-chan said! Verbatim!"

Ononoki-chan followed me from the treetops as I walked further up the mountain. She wasn't jumping like Kagenui-san, she was striding steadily along the branches.

"There are treetop snakes too—let me know if you find one, Ononoki-chan. For now, I'm going to be catching whatever snakes I find, regardless of color, so I can get a feel for this again."

"You some kind of snake-catching master?"

I grew up in the countryside, you know.

I understand why snakes can be scary, but if you prepare yourself, they're not so bad; just watch out for the fangs, and there's not much they can do.

"I don't have to worry about getting killed this time, so I feel a lot more comfortable now than when I was failing the countercurse."

"You should go to Amami Ooshima.(4) I heard you can get three thousand yen if you catch a yellow-spotted viper."

Really?

That's fascinating.

However, as a would-be manga artist and apprentice specialist, if I started aiming to be a snake-catching master too, then my plans for the future would stop making sense—

Got one.

One in each hand.

I wonder if they're parent and child?

"Yikes. These are pit vipers."

"Don't just say 'yikes'. At least use an exclamation point instead of a period."

Even I'm scared of pit vipers.

Just to be safe, I threw them further than before—in the opposite direction

I was walking, of course.

"…Couldn't we have exterminated those vipers?"

"Well, I *did* used to be a snake goddess, after all."

And my repulsion to snakes now might be less than it ever was. About a year ago, when I had wandered this mountain trying to catch snakes just like I'm doing now, I remember trembling in fear, despite growing up in the countryside.

Well, even though I don't have guts, I might have become tough.

"Everyone's perfectly fine with goldfish scooping, but if you told people they had to dissect the goldfish they catch, they'd hesitate to scoop any, right? It's like that."

"Is it…?"

"That said, back when Tsukihi-chan and I were in elementary school, there was a competition to see who could catch the most fish at the goldfish scooping stall, and the losers would buy the winner cotton candy. Tsukihi-chan beat the goldfish within an inch of their lives with the frame of the scoop before catching them."

"Don't bring up stuff from your friend's dark past like it's an anecdote. Within an inch of their lives?"

If that's what your childhood was like, I can understand why you became a snake-catching middle schooler, said Ononoki-chan.

Her dark past, huh.

I think all kids have had experiences like that, though… And if we take that discussion deeper, I wonder what we'd think of goldfish scooping itself.

The brutality of life.

Some people are fine with fishing but don't like cutting and trimming the fish; some people are fine touching fish, but are scared of touching the live bait—everyone has different ways of looking at life.

I clearly went too far back then, but to be overly regretful would be another form of taking things too far. I had used my regret to portray myself as a frail but virtuous person… That is to say, I couldn't help feeling like I was using my guilt as a justification for trying to live at ease with myself.

Kuchinawa-san was the personification of that.

"You can actually use a Y-shaped branch to press the snake's neck into the

ground like a *sasumata*,(5) but I'm a follower of the school of grabbing with your bare hands."

"That's not a real faction."

"You don't get the same grasping sensation with a branch. It's awkward."

"If it's awkward, then it's snakes you won't grasp, not sensation… You know, if you'd played up this master snake-catcher persona, I doubt you'd get ostracized at school."

Ostriches eat snakes.(6)

I mean, I'm not getting ostracized!

"If you don't catch them with your hands, you don't get that feeling of holding a life in your hands."

"That's something an expert would say. Or maybe something a psycho would say."

Probably more on the psycho side.

I chopped up a *huge* number of snakes a year ago… All together, I chopped up at least eighty-nine, didn't I?

No, I think it was around twenty or thirty at most.

I wonder what the proportion of albinism is. If it's one in every hundred, then I'll have to gather a total of eight thousand nine hundred snakes… And it might even be one in every thousand.

Or one in a million.

"In that case, isn't it unreasonable to ask me to find eighty-nine white snakes before dawn? I'll be lucky if I manage to find a couple."

"This isn't the first time Onee-chan has made unreasonable demands. …By the way, the North Pole, where Onee-chan was staying until recently, is one of the few places on Earth not inhabited by snakes."

So it's quite possible that she gave you this task without knowing much about snakes—Ononoki-chan said.

She was at the North Pole?

What kind of life does she lead?

Surely there's no reason to stay in a place like that.

"The Arctic isn't a continent, so it's not technically ground—Onee-chan was able to walk around freely, so it seems she found it rather pleasant. But

after the appearance of the legendary vampire's creator, she had no choice but to come back to Japan."

"…It's a strange curse, isn't it, not being able to walk on the ground."

The curse I'd been afflicted with a year ago was for my body to be squeezed by giant snakes, but in a sense it was typical, or rather, very straightforward.

After all, there are snakes that squeeze their prey to kill it.

But to not be able to walk on the ground…

"The five of them were afflicted with curses when they brought my corpse back to life. Onee-chan and Mr. Teori worked on my lower half, so their lower halves were cursed, and so on."

"Mr. Teori is… if I recall correctly…"

"The dollmaster. One of Gaen-san's four direct underclassmen. His role as a specialist is currently a bit different from Mr. Oshino and Mr. Kaiki's, but in college they were very alike."

"Hmm. Their lower halves were cursed because they worked on your lower half… So, who worked on your upper half? Oshino-san and Kaiki-san?"

"Yes. Although, technically, it's my torso they worked on, not my upper half. It was Gaen-san who worked on my head."

"Gaen-san—"

That's the one who had urgent business and couldn't come.

I wonder what kind of task she would have assigned me… I certainly don't think it would be something as arbitrary as finding eighty-nine white snakes in one night.

"Yes, Gaen-san. She knows everything—that's her curse."

"……"

Oh?

Did I just become privy to highly classified information?

Ononoki-chan, surely you're spilling too much.

Just because I listened to her complaints about Tsukihi-chan doesn't mean she should be so frank with the likes of *me*.

"If you intend to walk the path of a specialist, this is stuff you ought to

know. You don't have to know everything—just things like this. And of course, there are things it's better not to know. Like Around, for example, which is what Gaen-san is currently dealing with."

"Around?"

"Her urgent business. 'Critical business' might be a better term. I heard about it earlier from Onee-chan. That's the effect of her curse; Gaen-san has no choice but to know about stuff like that—she might look easy-going and omniscient from a first impression, but she's not. She's been punished. In this world, there are some taboos that you mustn't break."

"…But if Gaen-san and the others hadn't broken that taboo, you wouldn't be here, right, Ononoki-chan?"

"I suppose so. I see; the fact that you and I could become friends means that Gaen-san and the rest getting cursed was worth it."

No, no, no, no.

I'm happy to hear that, but the price they paid is way out of proportion… Another snake.

This time, I couldn't catch it.

Well, it clearly wasn't a white one, so that's alright—no catch, no release.

"What about Oshino-san and Kaiki-san? They worked on your torso, so what kind of curse did they get?"

"Their curses aren't as straightforward as the other three. I could tell you now, but it'd be boring if everything got spoiled, wouldn't it? Try figuring it out yourself."

Oh, my.

The flow of information suddenly stopped.

Ononoki-chan is intent on bringing me up properly—she might be dangerous, but she's a good friend.

Well, I would think their curses have something to do with the way they ordinarily behave… Like not being able to stay in one place for a long time, or not being able to say goodbye, or having to continually deceive people, or becoming a miser…?

I don't know how those relate to creating a torso, but it's probably something like that… I'll think about this properly tomorrow, after I've calmed down.

…Tomorrow, huh.

"Let me ask a different question, Ononoki-chan. I readily agreed to this because I was frightened of your Onee-chan, but what happens if I'm unable to complete the ritual of abdication? That is, if I can't capture eighty-nine white snakes?"

I should have made sure of that first.

I wanted Kagenui-san to get off my head as soon as possible, so I agreed immediately and started searching, but… if I can't do it tonight, could I finish tomorrow?

I wonder. My impression was that she thought it up on the spot, but she must have decided on this process using her knowledge as a specialist, so now that I've started, I feel like it would be bad if I failed or quit halfway through…

Since this isn't a ritual to remove a curse, it shouldn't result in a curse backfiring or something along those lines, but as someone who's been through that already, I can't help but say that it's rather too late for these misgivings.

"I'm not sure. This is outside my area of expertise, so I can't say for certain… But since you'd be failing to complete the ritual of abdication, whereby you turn over godhood to the next god, it would follow that…"

Ononoki-chan thought for a moment, then stated her hypothesis.

"…You'd become a god again, I suppose."

Footnotes:
(1) An unconventional reading of the kanji; I think Nisio explains it in Owari 3 or Zoku Owari.
(2) On the left-hand side of the character read "shiro" here is the radical (kanji component) that means "water".
(3) *Shirohebi* (white snake) and *shiromadara* (Oriental odd-tooth snake).
(4) An island in southwest Japan with a lot of yellow-spotted pit vipers.
(5) A two-pronged spear-like weapon used for catching criminals or in self-defense.
(6) The original has a pun with the two meanings of *habu*—1) yellow-spotted pit viper and 2) being ostracized.

005

Just for your reference, white snakes are a national protected species, so it's quite possible that catching eighty-nine of them without permission (with my bare hands) will incur some kind of punishment, regardless of whether it's for a ritual or any other purpose—quite unlike viper extermination.

However, I don't think I needed to worry about that just yet. Several hours passed, and my snake-catching intuition completely came back to me, but the protected species in question was nowhere to be found.

I can claim innocence… in a way.

Nevertheless, I shouldn't feel relieved—at this rate, I won't just fail to abdicate, I might even become enshrined as a god against my will.

Well, realistically speaking, I don't think that would happen… but when you start talking about gods, you've already deviated pretty far from what is "realistic".

The second advent of God-Nadeko.

That would not be good.

It's not just that I don't want to do it again; it would also be bad for the town. No matter what Ononoki-chan might say, I *know* I'm not cut out to be a goddess.

Judging from what I've heard, Hachikuji-chan seems much more suited for the position. At the very least, I don't want to steal her divinity back for myself.

Because this is a short, bonus story, I'd gotten careless, but my sense of danger quickly went up. I never thought the fate of this town would depend on my skills as a middle school snake-catcher.

Or that I'd end up having to do something in my capacity as a god *after* quitting godhood. My goodness, life never goes the way you expect.

Now, then… in any case, it seems I ought to change tactics. My strategy of "poking the brush to scare out the snake"(1) has reached its limit; it was highly ineffective.

I should probably search for a nest or a colony and catch them all at once. Even that seems a bit desperate, though…

I haven't exactly studied snake-catching from a textbook (occult-related information was all I studied from books), so this is a somewhat half-baked idea, but doesn't it seem likely that snakes would make their homes near water?

I was tired from walking for two hours straight, so I might as well rest for a little near a river, I thought… I followed the sound of water.

However, I didn't end up at a river—I ended up at a waterfall.

"Oh? If it isn't Ononoki-san! Which means you would be Sengoku-san,

no? This is the first time we've met in person."

There she was, bathing in the waterfall—no.

She wasn't bathing in it; her white undershirt was dripping wet, but she seemed to be taking a break, or maybe she had bathed already and quit—sitting on the bank, splashing her feet in the water, was a girl who looked to be ten years old.

Which means… this little girl is Mayoi Hachikuji-chan, then?

Apparently, while I was wandering aimlessly around the mountain trying to find white snakes, I'd made a full rotation about the shrine, and had returned to the summit.

It sounds like a joke, but it was nearly a disaster. Despite thinking I was proceeding in a straight line, I could have made a spiral and started going in circles.

"Talking about swirls and spirals reminds me of snail shells, but if you think about it, snakes are the same way. Snakes coil themselves in a spiral orbit. You don't even have to bring up the Ouroboros—it's like snakes revolve around themselves."

Seeming to imply something deep, Ononoki-chan finally dropped down from the treetops… and landed on my head.

I have to endure this from both the onmyouji and her shikigami?

"Hup!"

She sat down on my shoulders.

I was about to tell her to give me some personal space, but I held back my gut reflex.

Why? Because I was happy she'd become so attached to me… Hrm. The human mind is bizarre.

I'd become attached to people before, but never in my life had someone become attached to me.

"Hi there. Yep, I'm Nadeko Sengoku."

It would be hard to keep my balance if I tried to bow with someone riding on my shoulders (Ononoki-chan had not gotten rid of her body weight for me), so I simply introduced myself to Hachikuji-chan.

Although I'd heard her name so many times that she almost seemed like an old friend, it was most definitely our first time meeting.

Should we be meeting, though?

I still hadn't found a single white snake.

"That's fine, isn't it? The whole ritual thing is just for appearance's sake—as you can see, I got tired of it a while ago."

Got tired of it a while ago, huh.

It would seem she had bathed already and quit.

Her personality is as flexible as I'd heard… Makes me feel like a fool for earnestly trying to find snakes.

But in some ways, she's unlike what I'd heard. For instance, I'd heard that Mayoi Hachikuji-chan had a simple, iconic set of twintails, ones that brought to mind the antennae of a snail?

And at the moment, her hair was down.

Her wet hair gave off a sense of luster unbecoming of a little girl… I suppose she let it down to bathe in the waterfall, then?

"No, actually. I was ignorant of this until today, but apparently, snails actually have four antennae. Four, not two. I am currently struggling with an identity crisis, as it seems there was no point in my twintails."

That would be the upper and lower antennae.

That said, she couldn't exactly turn her twintails into quadruple tails, and honestly, from an outsider's perspective I didn't care either way… but that might be typical of identity-related distress.

My hairstyle caused me no end of distress, you know?

But everyone else just thought my bangs were annoying.

"Maybe I should cut it super short like you, Sengoku-san. It looks easy to handle. And even after getting soaked like this, it seems like it would dry right away."

"I wouldn't necessarily recommend it…"

I had already forced the fruits of my misconduct onto Hachikuji-chan, so I didn't want to force my hairstyle on her too.

It's true that it's easy to handle, though.

I walked over and sat down next to her—with Ononoki-chan still on my shoulders.

"But, Sengoku-san, you didn't get a buzz cut to show regret, did you?"

“Yeah… It wasn’t regret, I guess.”

And it’s not a buzz cut.

It’s embarrassing to say, but… “If I had to say, it was resolve. And of course, I do feel regret too. About when I was a goddess… no, about everything before that.”

“I think that’s perfectly fine. To be honest, I think Araragi-san is more at fault than you.”

Oh?

So she’s heard about that.

But hers was a fresh take on the matter.

I never expected Hachikuji-chan to take *my* side… Even Ononoki-chan, who was still on my shoulders, had some pretty harsh opinions on “Meek Nadeko”.

“I’m Araragi-san’s friend, so I’m harsh on him.”

They seem like good friends.

I suppose their relationship is like me and Tsukihi’s.

“I think that the way he pretended to be ignorant of your feelings was entirely unbecoming of a gentleman. Araragi-san bears a lot of responsibility for not paying attention to you. Don’t you think that was unfair of him?”

Compared to his dishonest behavior, Sengoku-san, it was admirable how you turned down that boy from your class—said Hachikuji-chan.

I don’t know about that.

Well, recently, my feelings for him had finally sublimed… However, it did make me feel a sense of futility knowing that my uncontrollable feelings hadn’t reached him at all.

To think that my comical advances hadn’t fazed him in the least…

“Faze, huh. Like a love dart.”

“Love dart? Like Cupid’s arrows?”

No, not that.

It’s a snail organ, like the upper and lower antennae.

The name may sound romantic, but I’ve heard that if a snail pierces another snail with one, it shortens the pierced partner’s lifespan—it’s a pretty

frightening organ.

"I died a fifth grader, never having experienced my first love. So while I can't give you much pertinent advice, from the perspective of a neutral party, you two reunited at a very bad time. You saw him for the first time in years on this mountain, right?"

Bad time, huh.

At the time, I was desperately trying to undo the curse I was afflicted with —now that I think about it, you could say that meeting him again when I was searching for and slaughtering snakes was the worst possible timing.

It's also true that we never would have gotten the chance to reunite under any other circumstances, though.

"But even if I'd met him again before Hanekawa-san and Senjougahara-san, or even Shinobu-chan, I doubt things would have turned out any different. Even in the unlikely event that my feelings for him had been requited…"

"You're right. There's a hundred percent chance that crazy girl would have stolen him from you."

Crazy girl, eh.

Ononoki-chan is harsh on that couple too.

I hear she's mellowed out now, but… If I may say, the fact that something like that didn't happen probably saved my life.

Come to think of it, Senjougahara-san didn't meet Koyomi-san until after he met Shinobu-chan and Hanekawa-san.

If that assertiveness is what defines love—love dart—then I guess you could argue I hadn't really experienced my first love yet, same as Hachikuji-chan.

But it's hard to see what love is when you've fallen in love.

…Wait.

Am I chatting about love with Hachikuji-chan right now?

I'd never actually done that.

When I talk to Ononoki-chan and Tsukihi-chan, we don't really gossip about this stuff (it's more like counseling for what's bothering us)… Maybe Hachikuji-chan would make an unexpectedly good goddess of love.

"That's right. I want everyone who's alive to experience the first love that

I never got to have before I died. That, if nothing else."

"So, Hachikuji-chan."

I'd thought it wouldn't be any use, so I hadn't planned on asking even if I saw her today, but I ended up asking her anyway.

That's how I am.

"Do you regret becoming a goddess?"

I forced it on her.

Or maybe it's not that simple.

I don't know the details, but I heard that Hachikuji-chan didn't have the luxury of choice.

Her only three options were to become a goddess, go back to Hell, or be devoured by the Darkness… essentially, just one option.

By the way, when Shinobu-chan was enshrined here as a goddess several hundred years ago, it certainly didn't seem as though that was what she wanted.

Well, if I had to say, it seems like Shinobu-chan's attitude back then was similar to mine—reigning just for herself… But Hachikuji-chan wanted to be something more.

I had gone crazy, but unlike me, Hachikuji-chan appeared to be maintaining her sense of self—that's why I wanted to ask her.

That's why I *did* ask her.

"I don't regret it. Even if I had another option, I probably would have chosen this path anyway."

"…Really?"

"Part of it is penance. When you pile up stones in Hell for a while, you really get to thinking. I'd be lying if I said that no real harm came to those people I made lose their way for eleven years—it makes me feel good to help people."

I used to make people lose their way.

Now I show them the way, and that makes me happy.

That's what Hachikuji-chan said.

"Even if someone told me they'd do it for me, I wouldn't let them. This is my job."

Guilt isn't just a reason to *not* do something; it can also be a reason to do something.

I wasted quite a lot of time before I realized that—my successor is truly admirable.

"…She didn't become a goddess just for Mr. Demon's sake. Well, Mayoi-nee-san, you've got to move on from him too, or you'll end up like the eternal exchange student, Shinobu Oshino."

'The eternal exchange student'?

Surely Shinobu-chan is a bit of an exception.

Hm… Hearing that, my motivation—which, to be honest, had started to diminish—came rushing back.

I need to abdicate, no matter what.

I need to abdicate for this girl.

To grant her her godhood, and her path.

It may be a road so rough that you'd hardly believe it was paved, but there's no doubt in my mind that this little lost girl will walk it proudly.

Even if it's just for appearance's sake, I've got to complete the abdication.

This will be the first and last duty I perform, active and combative, as the goddess of this shrine.

Resolved, I stood up—and I put that resolution into words.

"All right. I'll get you those eighty-nine white snakes, Hachikuji-chan!"

"Huh? Wait a second. What are you talking about? I haven't heard anything about that… Please don't give me something so creepy. I'd rather quit being a goddess and go back to Hell than accept a gift like that."

"But, Naduke, how are you going to solve our practical problem? The time limit is getting closer every minute."

Ononoki-chan asked me from on top of my shoulders.

She had apparently decided to ignore what Hachikuji-chan had just said, since it made the whole scheme seem dubious.

Despite saying that she couldn't help me, she appeared to be concerned about my plan of action—plus, she had elevated my rank to duke.

"It's alright. I took this unreasonable task a bit too seriously. I should have been more creative—I should have done it the way I wanted to do it, like

Hachikuji-chan did. I'll reflect on what I need to reflect on, but I wasn't supposed to take this so seriously. I shouldn't have forgotten who I am. Instead of just doing what I was told, I ought to have done what *I* wanted."

"Hmph. Which is?"

"Excuse me, I screwed up—like that."(2)

Oops.

I actually did screw up that line.

I'm a third-year in middle school who wants to be a manga artist, and what I meant to say there was: excuse me, I *drew up.*

Footnotes:
(1) A Japanese proverb.
(2) I had to make a small change to the traditional translation of Hachikuji's catchphrase because of the pun Nadeko makes on it in the last line. By the way, "drew up" *will* make sense in the next chapter, trust me.

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"So, Yozuru. How did it go? What was the outcome of the ritual of divine inheritance… I mean, what's the punch line?"

"Went off without a hitch, Gaen-senpai. It ended up pretty different from how I'd imagined, but it was a success. It was a *serious* success, I should say."

"Hmm. Alright then. What do you mean, specifically?"

"I gave Sengoku-chan the task of findin' eighty-nine white snakes for Hachikuji-chan. Well, there's nothin' special about the number—I just wanted it to make big."

"I see; that's a method I wouldn't have thought of. It's like you, Yozuru. But capturing nearly a hundred white snakes alive, don't you think that was a bit too hard? If things went badly, Sengoku-chan might have become a god again."

"Personally, I wouldn't have minded if that'd happened. The task might've been unrealistic, but it wasn't unreasonable. I wanted her to atone for the all that pointless snake slaughterin' she did."

"A tone? Oh, atone. Hmm. Despite what you say about Meme and Deishuu, you're pretty soft on kids too. That's a side of you I didn't expect to see."

"I hear Yotsugi thinks *you're* the one who's the softest on kids, Gaen-

senpai."

"That damn doll. So, when you say 'atone'… You wanted Sengoku-chan to help the white snakes *breed*, then? That's your model solution?"

"Ya really are keen, Gaen-senpai. In a league of your own. Really, I take my hat off to ya."

"In that case, will you *please* stop trying to land on my head over and over? It's not easy dodging."

"Don't even need eighty-nine white snakes—ya just need to catch two of 'em, and they'll have children. Someday, they'll have enough descendants to match the number of snakes she killed. If you kill one, you kill the ninety-nine that follow after, but if you *save* one, you save the ninety-nine that follow after. That's the basic principle of the circle of transmigration."

"I think it would be plenty difficult just catching two, though. You've got to have one male and one female, too… The basic principle of the circle of transmigration, huh. Is that why you hate immortal oddities, because they break those basic rules?"

"No need to talk about me. The problem is, Sengoku-chan flagrantly disregarded the model solution I went through so much trouble to give her."

"Flagrant disregard. Well, after all, you don't rely on your sense of vision when you hunt snakes. Besides, Sengoku-chan doesn't seem like the type that easily understands implicit meaning. But what kind of trick did she use to get through your ritual, then?"

"Y'know how the sacred object of that shrine is a paper talisman?"

"Yes? So it is. A snake, now that you mention it. What about it?"

"She used that. She drew eighty-nine white snakes on it, and delivered it her successor."

"She drew pictures? She drew pictures—"

"It's like they say, you can't eat a drawing of a mochi—same with snakes. (1) Well, some people say the origin of kagami-mochi(2) has to do with the way white snakes coil around themselves…"

"…But did that satisfy you? I mean, if you're satisfied, since I was the one who asked you to go in my place I have no right to criticize, but no matter how I look at it—"

"I had no choice. I'd heard from Yotsugi that she wanted to be a manga artist, but I was overwhelmed by her drawin' skill—no, it wasn't exactly that I got overwhelmed… Right, it made me believe I was lookin' at the real thing."

"The real thing?"

"Those white snakes looked as if they'd start movin' any second. It's not so much drawin' skills as it is magic powers. Stands to reason, after she created four shikigamis with the basics Yotsugi taught her."

"…In a way, she didn't even have to make them breed, she simply brought eighty-nine living white snakes into the world. She multiplied them through drawings—she *drew them up*. Impressive."

"Unfortunate that she didn't seem to understand the significance of doin' somethin' like that in front of a specialist. I think *that's* why it was right for her to yield the position to Hachikuji-chan. Too much of a good thing, y'know—Nadeko Sengoku should never have godhood, or anything like it."

"Hmph. Well, it seems we don't have to worry about Hachikuji-chan for the time being… Sengoku-chan, though. The girl for whom godhood was just a checkpoint. Given the situation, I should probably raise my assessment of her to the next level; she's a promising newcomer, so I wanted to take the time to bring her up properly… But now might be just the time for her breakout moment. Now that she's made amends for her past, how about we give her a job to do?"

"A job? Without any trainin'? Well, it was like that for us too, I guess. Whether she breaks out or drops out, the sooner the better, I think."

"Sure you want to be talking like it's someone else's problem? You two already have a relationship, so I want you to take part in this—Yotsugi too, of course."

"Hm? I don't have a problem with that, but if Yotsugi and I are goin', does that mean we'll be dealin' with an immortal monster this time—"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, it's a continuation of this urgent business I've been handling… Since my contract with Koyomin forbids me from asking him for help, I've been a bit short on manpower."

"So Sengoku-chan's gonna shoulder the burdens of Araragi-kun's carelessness, huh. What goes around comes around."

"That's right. Like a spiral; like a coil. In that sense, she's perfect for this. Everything, including the target, is just right for her."

Nadeko Sengoku's first target will be an immortal monster—the five-headed serpent, Uroko Around.

So declared Izuko Gaen-san, the specialists' manager who knows everything, in a place I didn't know.

Takes a snake to catch a snake in the grass!(3)

Footnotes:
(1) The idiom “a drawing of a mochi” (*e ni kaita mochi*) refers to something useless or unobtainable.
(2) Kagami mochi (“mirror ricecake”) is a traditional New Year decoration made of two round mochi stacked on top of each other, the smaller one on top of the larger one.
(3) Buckle up, friends. The original line here (蛇の道はヘヴィー・ローテーション!, *ja no michi wa heavy rotation*) has a lot going on that was impossible to take into English. As in my translation, there are two conjoined expressions here—in mine it’s “takes an x to catch an x” and “snake in the grass”—in the original it’s “takes one to know one” (using snakes as the example) and “heavy rotation”. Heavy rotation refers to something repeating over and over, typically a song on the radio or wearing an outfit. “Rotation” might be yet another spiral/coil reference, too.